Rich Mullins Interview by The Phantom Tollbooth

Rich Mullins

Concert quotes from Rich Mullins' Friday, December 6, 1996 appearance at New Creation Christian Fellowship, Milwaukee, Wisconsin

The secret of rock music: "*If you can't be good, be loud*."

The current trends in worship: *"Shallow, mindless, stupid, and perfectly harmless, at best."*

"*I don't want to be tolerated. Argue with me, and I will respect you."*

"It never fails. God will put people in your path that irritate you, especially if you're prone to be irritated.

"*I can understand why people would have doubts about the Bible. It's a weird, strange, goofy book!"*

Rich Mullins is one of the major fixtures of CCM. A string of his worship songs, including "Awesome God," "Sometimes By Steps," and "Sing Your Praise To The Lord," have found their way into the common psalter. He is a household name, and we know what we expect from Christian household names: someone successfully living out his faith in the conventional way, free of mistakes, comfortably well-off; a celebrity whose accomplishments elevate him above the rest of us struggling fools.

In a church sanctuary seating hundreds, treating the stage as his living room, the audience as his guests, Rich Mullins made his music and debunked himself. In between old favorites and new material from his latest CD, *Songs*, he had strong words for his listeners on many contemporary evangelical sacred cows, yet he still managed to unite us through our mutual love of Christ. Linda and Shari sat down with Rich for ten minutes after the performance.

Tollbooth: You said some really tough things about CCM in your concert tonight.

Mullins: I agree. I was really nasty tonight about CCM.

Tollbooth: We're covering a lot of the alternative groups, basically anybody who plays Cornerstone Festival, and we're finding that maybe that attitude isn't so uncommon.

Mullins: It's all the same. I think the most naive thing I've seen lately is the whole genre of alternative music. I mean it can't be alternative. As soon as it's accepted, then it's no longer alternative. As soon as rock'n'roll became commercial, it stopped being rock'n'roll.

Tollbooth: We go round and round about what are the alternatives. Shouldn't all alternatives be in alternative music?

Mullins: There really are none. I sound like a terrible determinist, and I'm not really. But basically all the big stuff is predetermined. You have no say whatsoever on what your folks are going to be like; you have no say whatsoever in terms of how tall you re going to be, how short, your basic build, your basic stamina. There are a lot of things that we don't have choices about. It could be a purely American phenomena, this craze about choices. It's just part of that illusion we've created in a feel-good culture.

Tollbooth: It sort of goes with prosperity; we have more options.

Mullins: But no real options. The truth is, everyone I know is going to be dead in the next thirty to forty years, so, what's the big deal? You kinda shrug your shoulders, and you say, "After you've been dead a few years, it isn't going to make a difference."

The thing about being forty is it's not as surprising to me as it used to be. I used to think about death a lot, and it was always a little bit intimidating to think about. Now I know a lot of dead people. It's not as big a deal as it used to be, but maybe because I'm not the one who died. I'm the one who's still living. I think I always grew up with a good attitude about it. You know, that's the advantage of coming from a large, extended family.

Tollbooth: I've seen you in festival settings before and have never heard you speak at such length. You have the capability of being quite charming and also extremely offensive.

Mullins: I love that combination.

Tollbooth: You certainly spoke your mind.

Mullins: Oh, I'm so guarded! If people really knew my mind, they'd go, "Oh, my gosh, where's the gasoline! We gotta burn this guy!" (laugher by all)

See, I think a lot of my songs are really political. I think nobody gets it, but it's hard for me to divide up my politics and my religious convictions. There's something offensive to me about having an American flag in a church building. When the CIA pretended to be missionaries and caused trouble in Chile so that all missionaries were kicked out, I think that makes the United States the enemy of the kingdom of God. I think a government that requires 18-year-old boys to register for the draft is anti-life. See, all the pro-lifers, they only think life is sacred if you are a fetus. I agree that life is sacred to fetuses, but I also think it's sacred to 18-year-olds. Where were you people when Nixon was in the White House? When Lyndon Johnson was escalating the war? Not that I necessarily think that everybody has to be a pacifist; I don't. But it does seem funny to me that so many people who are anti-abortion are pro-capital punishment. So many people who are anti-capital punishment are pro-abortion.

All I ask of anybody is that you make a little effort to be consistent. Life is one of those things that G. K. Chesterton says almost makes sense, which is the really tragic thing about life.

I really struggle with American Christianity. I'm not really sure that people with our cultural disabilities are capable of having souls, or being saved.

Tollbooth: Cultural disabilities?

Mullins: We could call it that. People who grow up in a culture that worships pleasure, leisure, and affluence. I think that's where the church is doubly damned when they use Jesus as a vehicle for achieving all of that. Like, if you give a tithe, He'll make you rich. Why? Are you hacking Him off or something? If you give a tithe, you get rid of ten percent of the root of all evil. You should be giving ninety percent. Cause God can handle money better than we can.

Tollbooth: What are you doing at Hilltop Christian School (on a Navajo Indian reservation) where you moved last year?

Mullins: I'm not doing anything there right now.

Tollbooth: What happened?

Mullins: They found out I wasn't a fundamentalist.

Tollbooth: (Laughter) Excuse me?

Mullins: Big surprise, huh?

Tollbooth: Your theology threw you out? Your beliefs?

Mullins: It wasn't like anybody pulled the carpet out from under me. I believe it's better for any organization to go the wrong way together than to go different ways separately. I totally understand, appreciate, and respect people who say, "we're not sure about this, but this is what we're doing. You really need to fit in with this, or you shouldn't be here." And I can respect that. We both agreed that I don't really need to be there right now, just because I don't "get" fundamentalists, and I don't really know that I want to be stuck with a bunch of 'em.

Tollbooth: But you're still out there. (Window Rock, New Mexico) Do you live near the mission?

Mullins: Yeah, we (Rich and roommate Mitch McVicker) live across the street, and we get along great with everybody at the mission. Everyone is really wonderful. In the meantime, it's given me a year to get to know more people out there personally and to become more familiar with the culture--to have a few more experiences teaching in different settings besides a formal classroom setting and Bible studies, to learn a little bit more about how you communicate to groups of people from that culture. I think it's been very providential.

Tollbooth: So you're out there, and it wasn't exactly what you planned, but you can still stay there on the reservation and not be part of the mission?

Mullins: I actually live on private land. I live in the checkerboard area. You can't get to my house without going through tribal land.

Tollbooth: White Americans can have trouble staying in the reservations.

Mullins: That all depends. What we've heard from people around us is that either you are accepted or you're not. If you're not, you never will be; if you are, you don't have to worry. I know we have been, but I always feel this way. Maybe I'm just really insensitive.

Tollbooth: Tell us about your musical, *Canticle of the Plains.*

Mullins: Well, we're re-writing it again.

Tollbooth: Again?

Mullins: Yeah. I think you just keep re-writing it, no matter what.

Tollbooth: Until someone yanks it out of your hands and throws it on the stage?

Mullins: Well, I'm not going to let anybody do that. I'm not really sure

what I want to do with it. For one thing, I'm not really sure who's going to be interested in it.

Tollbooth: That was one of the things I wanted to ask you.

Mullins: I really have no idea. The coolest thing about working on a musical has just been getting away from a record company, getting away from any kind of organization, and saying, "man, let's do something for the shear fun of it." And then there are all of these things you have to do, but you just take it one step at a time. It's been a real exercise in faith. It's been very, very rewarding, and I feel really excited about the people working with us on the project.

Tollbooth: Is it still a western based on the life of Francis of Assisi?

Mullins: Yes. We've performed it twice now--once in Indianapolis, and once in Phoenix--just to try it out, to see what's working and what's not. Each time we perform it, we come back, tear it apart, and start from scratch. We ask, "what are we really trying to say, and how can we?"

The biggest thing, in terms of writing, is that I have a tendency to preach way more than I ought to. So we just went though and said, "OK, let's just cut out all the preaching." And that cut out a good third of it, which was really nice, because we don't want it to be unbearably long.

We make the same mistakes writing plays that I used to make writing songs. When I started writing songs, I thought you had to say everything that you knew in every song. You can always tell a young writer because they always do that. And you just kind of go, "OK, I know all about your theology, but I have no interest at all in your song."

People say, "Writing is such hard work." No! Writing is fun. Re-writing is the hard part. Re-writing is the drudgery, where you go back and cut in order to make the pace right, in order to make it flow. You have to decide what are we going to get rid of.

Tollbooth: It is work! Not to be taken too seriously, because it's CCM.

Mullins: Well, because it's human. Nothing that we do should be taken too seriously.

By Linda Thompson Stonehocker

The music for *Canticle Of The Plains* is already recorded, featuring Kevin Smith and Mike Tate of DC Talk.

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On September 19th, 1997, Rich Mullins died after a traffic accident near Peoria Illinois. Rich was in his jeep with Mitch McVicker in route to Wichita for a concert. The jeep lost control and flipped, ejecting both men. Rich was killed instantly. Rich was 41years old. Please keep Rich's family and his friends in your Prayers. A Memorial in Rich's honor has been established for Compassion USA.

The Jordan is waiting for me to cross thru
My heart is aging I can tell
So Lord I'm begging for one last favour from You
Here's my heart
Take it where you will

This life has shown me how we're mended
And how we're torn
How it's O.K. to be lonely
As long as you're free
Sometimes my ground was stony
And sometimes covered up with thorns
And only you could make it what it had to be
And now that it's done
If they dressed me like a pauper
Or if they dined me like a prince
If they lay me with my fathers
Or if my ashes scatter on the wind
I don't care

When I go I wanna go out like Elijah
With a whirlwind to fuel my chariot of fire
And when I look back on the stars
It'll be like a candlelight in Central Park
And it won't break my heart to say goodbye

There's people been friendly

But they'd never be your friends
Sometimes this has bent me to the ground
But now that this is all ending I want to
Hear some music once again
'Cause it's the finest thing
That I have ever found

But the Jordan is waiting
Though I ain't never seen the other side
Still they say you can't take in
The things you have here
So on the road to salvation
I stick out my thumb and He gives me a ride
And his music is already falling on my ears
There's people been talking
They say they're worried about my soul
Well I'm here to tell you i'll keep rocking
Til I'm sure it's my time to roll

When I go I wanna go out like Elijah
With a whirlwind to fuel my chariot of fire
And when I look back on the stars
It'll be like a candlelight in Central Park
And it won't break my heart to say goodbye

from "Elijah" by Rich Mullins

"When you remember me, it means you have carried something of who I am with you, that I have left some mark of who I am on who you are. I means that you can summon me back to your mind even though countless years and miles may stand between us. It means that if we meet again, you will know me. It means that even after I die, you can still see my face and hear my voice and speak to me in your heart."---Frederick Buechner
Information of the Jesus Project

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